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Police sending the wrong message

What message do police officers leave with the public when they refuse to co-operate with the civilian authority set up to investigate police shootings? That they are above the law? That their rights are so sacrosanct they must be guarded more than any other? That average citizens who witness a shooting should be as tight-lipped as the police have been?

Even more disturbing is the warning from police union president Paul Walter that, in future, officers won't give statements to the Special Investigations Unit (SIU), the civilian body that investigates police shootings, until they are guaranteed in writing that they are not the subject of criminal charges.

Walter is apparently upset because two officers interviewed by the SIU on Saturday, believing they were only "witness officers" and therefore not subject to criminal charges, have now had their status upgraded to "subject officer" and could be charged.

There are no ironclad laws dictating that police co-operate with the SIU. Rather, under a "protocol" sanctioned by the ministries of the attorney-general and solicitor-general, a police chief must give the SIU copies of all relevant statements and reports by officers, except those made by a "subject officer" — one whose conduct appears to have caused death or injury and who may face charges.

The protocol acknowledges that under common law and the Charter of Rights, a "subject officer" has the right to refuse to be interviewed by the SIU. But other officers are required to answer questions "at reasonable times."

A "reasonable time" would be one day, two at most. Yet, a week after police shot dead Hugh Dawson during a botched police drug buy and attempted arrest — with seven officers surrounding the suspect — the SIU has yet to interview all the officers involved.

Solicitor-General Bob Runciman should amend Bill 105, the Police Services Amendment Act, to guarantee that, as a condition of employment, all officers be required to give statements to the SIU right after a shooting, not a week later or at their convenience, or not at all. If the police union thinks there is a Charter case to be made, on the grounds that an officer can't be forced to incriminate himself or herself, let the union take the issue to the courts.